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A look to the future

Television and Intelligence

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October 1996. International peace talks aimed at resolving a protracted regional conflict are about to open. Preparatory discussions are at a critical stage. At this inopportune moment, the government of one of the key regional players, the US Government's major ally in the area, begins to experience growing pressures from religious radicals. Capitalizing on domestic problems as well as the prospect of an unacceptable compromise involving territorial exchange and the status of disputed religious sites, fundamentalist elements have intensified a campaign of violence against tourists and government officials.

2300 Washington time, 23 October. As evidence of a deteriorating security situation in the threatened regime's capital is collected and analyzed, the senior watch officers from around the Intelligence Community meet in a NOIWON to discuss the situation. Reports from the US Embassy and CIA station have taken on an increasingly urgent tone, and CNN is reporting that police have failed to disburse a crowd and that groups of militants are moving through several of the major hotels assaulting foreigners. At least a dozen foreign nationals are reported to have been seriously injured in street assaults, and unconfirmed reports indicate that three foreigners—none American—are dead.

While the NOIWON is in session, the duty producers of the television production staff at CIA, NSA, State, and DIA are meeting in a parallel conference. The senior duty producer, a rotational designation this evening held by the producer at the Defense Intelligence Network (DIN), opens the discussion.

"My understanding is that the situation is about to cross the threshold for issuing a CRITIC. What we need to decide is what we can contribute to an understanding of the situation. We're getting good attaché reporting that we could use on a Special Report. Anybody else?"

"This is NPIC. We've got some fairly useful imagery that can address some issues of crowd size and locations."

"What about movement at military facilities around the capital," asks the DIA producer.

"Nothing yet, but we're working on it. If we do a followup report later tonight, we should have something."

"This is CIA. We have some recent work on factional conflicts in the Brotherhood that we can report, plus we're getting a pretty good flow of information from the station."

"Can you give us anything on some of the personalities involved in the Brotherhood?"

"Sure. We have just put together some information on radical leaders, and we can give a quick summary of who's who."

"Good. NSA, what about SI?"

"Well, we've been reporting on the military and security services' concerns that, if the government didn't really crack down hard on the extremists, things were going to get out of hand. Beyond that, we have lots of police and security communications on the current trouble but no unusual military communications. It looks like the security forces think they may have underestimated the crowd size this morning but that, overall, they are confident of keeping the lid on."

The duty producer announces the first decision of the night: "Okay, I propose we break into the Community's broadcast systems in 11 minutes with a Special Report

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that I will schedule for 12 to 15 minutes. After the initial segment, which will be 'broadcast' format only, I propose we go interactive with 'write' privileges for the White House, the other watch centers, and CENTCOM, with everyone else restricted to 'read only.'" The reference is to which viewers will get to comment or ask questions, using language borrowed from computer jargon. "Anybody have any heartburn on that? If not, I will propose a three-minute opening summarizing the situation from previous reporting, followed by two minutes apiece from NPIC, CIA, NSA, and DIA, in that order. State, I would like you to close the roundrobin with two or three minutes from your folks putting some of the regional context into the picture. At that point, we open the lines for questions and comments. Okay?"

"This is CIA. The NIO (National Intelligence Officer) for Warning and the regional NIO are in the Operations Center reviewing the situation with the Associate Deputy Director for Intelligence. Do you want to see if we can get them on?"

"See if they're available. We could use them for an interactive wrap up. If there are no other questions, I will ask you to alert your respective technical folks that we want the network in exactly 10 minutes. The script for the opening segment is being done now and you should have a faxed copy in a few minutes. With this timeline, we are looking for factual errors only—not wordsmithing! Hold on, everybody. I've just been told we have the defense attaché on the phone; we're going to keep her on hold and interview her during the DIA segment."

Minutes later, customers receiving classified television over the DIN or other classified networks hear an announcement to stand by for a special Intelligence Community report on the developing situation. Viewers with their televisions tuned to CNN or some other commercial station receive both an audio signal and a subtitle alerting them to switch to their classified delivery channel.

"We interrupt regular programming to bring you a report on the situation. Over the next few minutes, CIA, DIA, State, NPIC, and NSA will provide the most recent information available to the Intelligence Community on the events you've probably been observing over CNN. First, a summary of previously reported information. . . ."

This is not a description of a current Intelligence Community capability. Nor is it an excerpt from a coming post-Cold War Tom Clancy novel. It is a projection of a capability the community may choose to develop in the near future to provide customers with real-time information on critical situations. It is also a logical and necessary extension of current efforts to explore how television can be used in the delivery of intelligence.

The State of (Classified) Television Art

The Persian Gulf war changed the way policymakers and intelligence agencies used and thought about television. Television has been a significant element in American political life since at least the 1960 election, and Vietnam made television more important to policymakers. Almost exclusively, however, the importance of television was in permitting a president to advance his policy views or, especially in Vietnam, was seen as a key tool in measuring how the American people viewed a president and his policies.

By the late 1980s, however, with the withering of the totalitarian state and with the technical advances that allowed television transmissions to originate from one- or two-person teams armed with their own satellite transmitters and receivers, open-source, commercial television became an increasingly important real-time source of developing information. The suppression of the democratic movement in China, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union were witnessed worldwide. The President of the United States saw the Berlin Wall fall in real time; so did millions of others.

If these events and others presaged the coming of age of television as a source of information to policymakers in times of rapidly developing events, the Persian Gulf war marked its full coming of age. From the public diplomacy waged well by the United States and its allies and abysmally by Iraq to the extraordinary, unprecedented coverage of Desert Storm, television was an important participant in the Gulf crisis. CNN was at the eye of this particular storm, with its correspondents providing virtual forward air observation on the first Allied

attacks on Baghdad, and other correspondents becoming embroiled in controversy over such issues as the "baby food factory" and the nature and use of the heavily reinforced bunker bombed by the Allies late in the fighting.

For the Intelligence Community as for everyone else, television proved a central source of information. It also provided intense competition. Having developed in a world in which totalitarian regimes effectively controlled the flow of information from and to their countries, the Community for years had extraordinary advantages over open-source media in access to information and the means to assess and disseminate that information in a timely fashion.

By the time of the Gulf war, the Community retained those advantages in certain areas, while in others open sources had competitive or even better access to information and the capability to beat the Community on timeliness. That is not to say open-source information was more accurate than that provided by the Community. (One CNN anchor had a wonderful proclivity for referring to the Patriot as an "anti-anti-missile," seemingly advancing it to the level of a metaphysical rather than merely a technological achievement.)

But the perception or at least the suspicion developed that open sources had the edge on the Community. While participating in a briefing for members of the Senate, complete with the normal and necessary, "I'm sorry, Senator, we can't provide that information at this classification level" responses to certain questions, my colleagues and I were startled when one Senator strode out of the room announcing, "I can get better information from CNN." One particularly bold member of the briefing team intercepted the Senator outside the room and assured him that he might in fact get faster information from CNN, but not better information. On another occasion, I was on the phone with a member of the NSC Staff when someone from the CIA Operations Center stuck his head in my door and announced that we had received confirmation of another Scud launch on Tel Aviv. Ever the customer-friendly analyst, I passed this on to the NSC Staff member, promising, "I'll call you back when we determine the exact impact point." "That's okay, don't bother," came the reply. "I can get that on CNN."

Community Reaction to Television

If you cannot beat them, as the phrase goes, . . . Within a few months of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the DIN became operational. Intelligence agencies had used television for years as a training medium; several had closed-circuit television systems for the broadcast of commercial or classified information. But the DIN was something different: a network planned as an alternative means of delivering information to consumers. Emphasizing briefings, summaries, and a range of special reports as diverse as the interests of the Defense and Defense Intelligence communities, the DIN established itself as a major step by the Community to respond to the competition from open-source television.

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With even this fragmentary evidence as a baseline, the Community's efforts have taken on a renewed focus and urgency. In June 1994 the Deputy Director of

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Central Intelligence called for the creation of an inter-agency executive steering group to coordinate the Community's video broadcast efforts. This group, chaired by the Director of Military Intelligence, Lt. Gen. James Clapper, was charged with moving the Community's efforts "to the next plateau." As implied in this directive, the future seems to offer a simple choice: either the Community will do a better job of using the television medium or the resources employed in the existing television efforts will be reapplied elsewhere. Continuing at the present state of operations does not appear to be an option. Where do we go from here?

The Codeword CNN Issue

One concern raised in Congress and elsewhere about the Intelligence Community's use of television is summarized in the phrase "We don't want a Codeword CNN." Before accepting this as a doctrine of what "they" want, this dictum needs to be examined. If the concern is that the Community will spend millions of dollars to produce something that looks like CNN *and provides information available through CNN*, the skeptics are correct. In television as in print and other media, the Community must accept the reality of increased open-source access to much of the world's information. Any Community television effort must focus on that information unique to the Intelligence Community, that is, information that could not have been obtained readily, if at all, from open sources.

On that issue, there should be little debate. The cost/benefit analysis inherent in this exercise should not, however, apply only to television, nor should televised intelligence have to clear some higher threshold of performance than that required of other media.

In several respects, including a passion for timeliness and a willingness to use multiple formats (CNN versus CNN Headline News) to provide service to their viewers, the Community's television efforts have much to learn from CNN, as well as from other open-source networks. Government is being pressed to find benchmarks from leaders in private industry, and CNN is the benchmark provider of time-sensitive televised information. The Intelligence Community should be encouraged to use the best techniques and practices of the commercial television industry, not be criticized for it.

We should not be encouraged to use classified television media and systems to duplicate the information available to our consumers through CNN. And we should be rebuked if we try to build three or four "codeword CNNs," each acting with minimal recognition of the existence of the others. In television, perhaps more than through any other medium, the Community of the future needs to function more cooperatively than ever before.

The (Video) Community of the Future

Cost alone should drive us to this conclusion. Television is and will remain an expensive dissemination medium, and duplication of effort should be discouraged. To their credit, the television centers in the Community have recognized this and have been meeting regularly since early in 1993 to establish and maintain a continuing dialogue on standards, techniques, and programming. More needs to be done in coordination efforts, but the principle seems well established that Community cooperation will be one of the key measures of the success or failure of classified video dissemination.

The technical problems facing this effort are significant but not critical. Commercial television routinely moves information across networks and even across differing technical standards for screen definition and so forth. The Intelligence Community should be able to do the same. The truly critical issue is bureaucratic, not technical. Can the Community demonstrate a willingness to put a premium on providing joint or at least coordinated services to the consumer? In the end, we will have no choice, because the consumer will demand this level of service, and Congress is unlikely to tolerate (or fund) anything else.

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on dedicated (and probably duplicate) capabilities. The Defense Department's Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communication System (JWICS) will carry much of the Community's video needs. At some point, data compression techniques may allow use of existing secure telephone lines for multimedia presentations, including full-motion video.

Each agency of the Community, as it develops a television capability, is likely to experience the same mix of "local" and "network" audiences and needs. Here, again, the Community need only look at the network-affiliate relationship in commercial broadcasting for a model on which to develop our operations. Affiliates of the major commercial networks generally purchase that network's programs; at the very least, they have first call on those programs within their local area. They may choose, however, to supplant a network program with a program of greater local interest, on a continuing or ad hoc basis. The Community network, most likely arrayed around a DIN hub, could do the same.

Other models of value from commercial broadcasting include CNN Headline News and its "predictable programming" format. Anyone familiar with Headline News who wants to catch up on the current headlines knows to tune in on the hour and the half-hour. Entertainment, business, or sports viewers no doubt know the "slot" for the segments of interest to them. A Community service should look closely at this format.

Viewers of the morning news programs, *Today* and its competitors, are also familiar with the national-local time sharing used on those shows. *Today* originates from New York for most of its two hours, with scheduled local segments placed in its formats. Viewers in Washington get *Today in Washington* segments, and viewers in Omaha and elsewhere get similar features

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The commercial industry also offers lessons on the technical side, including the need for technical compatibility and flexibility. To the greatest degree possible, the Community video service of the future must operate using existing or planned multipurpose communications links and facilities, rather than expecting expenditure

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To cite one hypothetical but plausible example, assume a future nuclear accident at Chernobyl'. In a post-Soviet Union environment, Ukraine, instead of concealing the disaster, immediately requests help from the West, with the US European Command tasked to take the lead in organizing logistics for the effort. An integrated system based on the components noted above could provide EUCOM, Department of Energy, and other forward personnel with continuing visual support from the best expertise available from US Government agencies and the National Laboratories. It should even be possible for teams on site at or in a damaged facility to transmit live television back to stateside analysts for advice and commentary.

To be blunt, no one will turn to the Community in search of Emmy-winning graphics or special effects. In the end, consumers will be looking for information, and the test will be whether we can use all the systems at our disposal to link the consumer in need of information to the person or persons who can provide that information. All else is peripheral.

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In building an intelligence television system that can meet this test, it will be essential to provide both systems and procedures that will ensure technical compatibility and operational integration across the various agency-based networks. This will be especially true in providing time-sensitive support. Developing the procedures that make for an effective Community presentation in this area will require significant effort and probably a good bit of trial and error. The tradeoffs between timeliness and coordination, for example, are likely to prove especially difficult, and it is at least possible that time-sensitive support will emphasize comprehension—providing the consumer with the latest from a range of sources, over formal coordination. The interactive component that will almost certainly factor into any future Community effort will make it even more difficult to provide the level of precision achievable in print media. Precision and formal coordination are likely to suffer in pursuit of timeliness. How much can they suffer and how can their loss be limited through training of personnel and careful delineation of procedures are serious issues; they must be addressed and their implications understood as the Community expands its use of video.

One factor has to be kept in mind as we evaluate the implications of the use of television. Our viewers will be accustomed to the medium; they have, after all, grown up with it. This means that implicitly they will make comparisons between the service provided by the Community and what they get on commercial television. Those involved in Community television efforts have to be alert to the need to make it clear to viewers (and to themselves) that some measure of comparison between commercial and intelligence television is possible and permissible. We have to be even clearer in identifying those areas in which the two are different. In that respect, we have to acknowledge the “slippery slope” from intelligence, through journalism, to entertainment. With all due respect to journalists and entertainers, we are neither. We may borrow techniques and formats from both, but we have to be clear about the need to develop our own way of doing business. As the Director of DIA has recently made clear, the DIN is a rapid, flexible medium for intelligence dissemination.

One of the keys Congressional and executive consumers and overseers ought to use in measuring the Intelligence Community's performance in using television is

the level of cooperation among the elements of the Community. Another is the Community's ability to use the television medium in its most effective role: as a medium of unparalleled responsiveness and flexibility in transmitting information in time-sensitive situations. If television can meet that challenge (which more accurately translates into if the Community can meet this challenge), then the investments being made in broadcast capability will prove justified. In not—if we limit ourselves to reporting on events after the fact, or if we fail to maintain the qualitative edge of emphasizing information not available through open sources, or if we operate without a sense of corporate responsibility—then we should not be surprised to find our efforts described as poor attempts to compete with CNN at many times the cost of a commercial cable hookup.

Taking the Intelligence Community into the television medium will require significant technical investment. To an even greater degree, it will require the development of procedures to handle a difficult range of procedures governing classification and distribution. Most of all, however, it will require the corporate will to take on these other issues and problems in pursuit of a common objective.

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Epilogue

The future may be closer than the body of this article would seem to imply. By late 1994 several events had coincided to accelerate the pace of broadcast video development in the Community.

The creation of the Executive Steering Group was one of those events, confirming the Community's commitment to the video broadcast medium. At the same time, CIA has engaged its analytic resources in DIN operations at unprecedented levels.

[redacted] emphasized or accelerated three trends. First, the need to move toward time-sensitive, crisis-driven use of the broadcast medium, [redacted]

[redacted] the DIN produced a range of live programs originating from DIN studios in the Pentagon and from NSA, heretofore the hubs of DIN operations. The truly remarkable aspect of these programs, however, was the live remotes from [redacted] Intelligence Task Force in the Pentagon [redacted]

Second, [redacted] demonstrated the vitality of the video medium for two-way dissemination. The need to move intelligence from national producers to tactical users had long been at the center of Community planning for video broadcasts. Understated if not overlooked in this process had been the degree to which, in actual operations, the communications path is reversed; it is the person on the scene who has information to contribute back up to the national producer, who then becomes a user of tactical information.

Finally, the [redacted] effort demonstrates that a combination of good sense and technical realities will counter any tendencies toward duplicative use ("the four code-word CNNs problem") in broadcast video operations. Without leaning too hard on sense, the communications bandwidth required for multiple and competing broadcasts simply does not exist. And it almost certainly will not exist until we reenter a period of fiscal abundance. In the long run, as Keynes said, we are all dead.

Consumers of [redacted] broadcasts received timely, all-source intelligence, in the best and fullest sense of the term. In several instances, personnel from [redacted] Intelligence Task Force were able to comment on raw intelligence received only a few moments before. Though limits to the wisdom of such instant analysis undoubtedly exist and need to be incorporated into the operating procedures used in video broadcast dissemination, the overriding fact of the [redacted] test case was the seemingly implicit acceptance of interagency communication and integration in broadcast presentations.

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